Chapter 9

Dissertation Summary and Conclusions

9.1. Objectives of the research

The journey of this research began with wanting to understand artists better. When speaking of artists, I refer to those who practice their art at a professional level, who are extremely proficient and have invested at least two decades to explore their chosen form, who are at the cutting edge of their respective domains, and have received substantial recognition from society for their art. Artists as a group are different from non-artists in many ways. Since there have continually been links in research between artistic ability and other mental abilities, I fastened upon the mind of the artist as the main subject for study. The surge of interest in the western world, especially America, to include arts in mainstream education has focused on the benefits of art, especially non-art benefits such as improved reasoning, better verbal skills, and improved numerical ability. (E.g. Deasy [2002], Winner and Hetland [2000]). But there has not been much research on the artistic mind itself. Understanding the artistic mind and the development of the artist might make it easier to spot such a mind in the making in children and young adults and open up possibilities in the arts as an option for living. Hence the objective of the present study was to contribute to filling that gap is possible.

9.2. Previous research in the area

A review of literature suggests a major cognitive component to the arts (Adorno [1970], Srinivasan [1980], Young [2001]), but while there is a large body of research devoted to intelligence, creativity and other mental capacities, there is very little and very sporadic work on artistic ability. According to Clark and Zimmerman (1984), this was due to a lack to tools to study artistic ability and due to confounding of the terms ‘creative’, ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’ in research literature. Presumably, the term ‘artistic’ just fell through the gaps. There were initial efforts to measure artistic ability by researchers such as Meier (visual art judgment, 1926/1942) and Seashore (musical ability test, 1919/1940). But from then on research took a different turn. The concept of intelligence gained in importance and researchers such as Lewerenz (1928), Tiebout and Meier (1936), Simon and Ward (1973) and many others established that there is a relationship between artistic ability and intelligence. In the latter part of the 20th century, the focus in research was more on art as a window to the mind and a strong case was being made, especially in the United States for the inclusion of art in school curriculum. Scholars found that immersion in an art form had several cognitive benefits such as improved scores on
scholastic ability tests through music (Vaughn and Winner 2000), on improved reading skills through dance (Keinanen, Hetland and Winner 2000), on improved spatial temporal reasoning through music (Raucher et al. 1999), etc. But the focus in these studies was on the end result of better spatial skills or SAT scores and art was merely instrumental. I wished to make art and artists the focus point of this study and hence looked around for a theory that includes artistic ability as part of cognitive ability.

The only theory of mental ability that does directly include artistic ability is Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences. Evolved from his work with Project Zero, a research effort promoting arts education, this was natural. The theory was more inclusive than traditional definitions of mental ability not only in the kind of people who could be considered intelligent as per its constructs, but also conceptually inclusive, so that mental ability is no longer seen in isolation but as working with other non-cognitive factors. Gardner (1983) defined intelligence as ‘the ability to solve problems or create products that would be valued in at least one culture’. Briefly, the theory argues for the existence of eight different kinds of intelligence – Linguistic, Logical-mathematical, Spatial, Musical, Kinesthetic, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal and Naturalist. Psychometric support for MI theory is limited (Shearer [1997], Preito et al [2005], Shearer [2006], Harris and Sykes [2010]) but there are many studies that apply MI in classrooms around the world and have found promising results (Campbell [1991,1999], Gardner, Feldman and Krechevsky [1998], Hasan and Maluf [1999], Hall-Haley [2001] Baum, Viens and Slatin [2005], Castejon, Perez and Gilar [2010]). There is also a lot of congruence between MI theory and the Indian view of intelligence identified by Srivastava and Misra (2007) according to which there are four dimensions of intelligence – Cognitive, Emotional, Social and Entrepreneurial. Hence, MI theory was chosen as a possible way to explore the artistic mind.

9.3. Preliminary field study

One of the issues to be addressed right at the start was measurement of the multiple intelligences. If I wanted to use MI as a framework to understand artists, I had to come up with a way to capture these diverse abilities. Traditionally, intelligence or any ability is best assessed by some task performance – calculating something, completing a chain of reasoning, solving a verbal puzzle, etc. However, these type of tests do not take into account the daily manifestations of intelligence. Studies using MI theory have been mainly qualitative, applying the theory to help development in an educational context. Assessment of MI in these studies has been done primarily through observation, supported by other measures. Even the studies that offer statistical support for MI theory use self-report questionnaires (such as Shearer 1997, 2006) and not speeded or powered ability tests. The very feature of MI theory that made it attractive as a frame of reference to investigate the artistic mind also posed the maximum difficulty when it came to defining the research approach. Hence, a small field study was done to sort
out these issues and identify a way forward. I created a new questionnaire that aimed to capture the multiple intelligences. The questionnaire as a tool has certain advantages over a test. It can take into account interest, opportunity and other manifestations of an intelligence in daily life. For example, in capturing musical intelligence, a repeated item in several MI questionnaires is about ‘having music in my head’ or ‘I listen to music all the time.’ Even in numerical intelligence which is easily captured in a paper-pencil test, MI theory would include manifestations such as memory for strings of numbers like car number plates or phone numbers, or ability to do mental math versus counting on the fingers when asked to calculate everyday accounts. It is also possible to create a profile indicating individual strengths and weaknesses from questionnaire output. While it is not as definitive or objective as a test, it could still be a starting point for a discussion around an individual’s MI profile. So, the questionnaire was created and tried on a sample of college students (n=126) and yielded some interesting results. The data was examined to check whether the questionnaire discriminates between individuals on an intelligence and between intelligences for an individual. The questionnaire was successfully able to do the first part of its job, i.e. it differentiated between individuals on each intelligence. But it fell short of its second objective, the data being unsuitable for factor analysis. On manually searching for alphas of 0.4 and above, there were six factors that emerged - i) Music, ii) Dance, iii) Sport, iv) Math, v) Logic, and vi) Language/linguistic. I reasoned that this was probably because the manifestations of any one intelligence are so varied that it is difficult to capture them within a single tool. In reality, the intelligences also tend to work together quite seamlessly so that it is difficult to draw a line between one and the other intelligence. The scores on the personal intelligences, especially intrapersonal intelligence were also not very high suggesting that perhaps for college students, clarity about their intellectual strengths has not yet set in. Further, the data highlighted the importance of family and social environment in the development of intelligence. Therefore, I concluded that an in-depth qualitative inquiry would probably be a better way to understand the mind of the artist. It would allow for unstructured discussions around the family and growing up environments of artists, it would help answer the question of how an individual chooses to be an artist and more than anything else, would help understand the perspective of the artist in describing their own intellectual strengths.

9.4. The Research Approach in Phase 2

The method of choice for inquiry into the process by which an individual becomes an artist and the early social environment and growing up experiences that contribute to this process was clearly the in-depth unstructured interview. The perspective of the artist was central to this inquiry and the interview was the best way to ensure that the artist’s voice was prominent in the data. Interviews were therefore undertaken with mid-career artists, those who had been immersed in their art for at least two decades.
and had some experience of practicing their art. To understand the mature expression of artistic ability, and the factors that lead up to it, a biographic study of twelve leading artists of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century was also undertaken. The questionnaire used in Phase 1 of the study was modified and retained to be used within the context of the interview. Henwood (in Richardson Eds. 1996) says that qualitative methods are privileged within the qualitative paradigm. But it is possible to use numerical methods, tools and techniques with a predominantly qualitative epistemology. The MI questionnaire used here (Appendix B) is an example of a numerical data source/tool used within a predominantly qualitative study, but the way it was applied allowed for the participants to elaborate on their answers, change categories if they felt it necessary, qualify their answers and express their opinions on the questions themselves. In addition to these three sources of data, the artists’ work was also observed/experienced to corroborate the themes emerging from questionnaire, interviews or biographies.

The sampling principle of homogeneity-heterogeneity helped decide whom to include in the sample and the principle of divergence-saturation helped decide the limits of the sample. All in all, twenty one artists were interviewed and twelve great artists were chosen for biographic study from ten different artistic fields including dance, music, drama, film, painting, sculpture, crafts (pottery), design, photography and literature. Three different family background categories surfaced from the data itself. Artistic Heritage refers to those artists coming from families where one or more significant other, usually a parent is a practicing artistic professional. Arts Sensitive is a family background that is oriented to understanding the arts, but does not see it as a possible mainstay of existence. Non-artistic background refers to families where no one is involved in the arts and exposure to the artistic process is limited to occasional observation. To understand better the role of family and social environment better, I also interviewed three non-artists who hailed from Artistic Heritage families to understand the influences in their lives and how they chose to not be artists. The choice of sample was an iterative process that happened as I met or read about and wrote about each artist and the analysis was ongoing, each case being compared to the previous ones to generate concepts and hypotheses about how the artistic mind works, the artistic personality, the artistic choice process and the artistic environment. The findings were all pulled together into a model describing the process of artistic development in the previous chapter on the Artistic Composite and are described in brief next.

9.5. The making of an artist: concepts and models emerging from this research

Artistic intelligence was an important construct that came up in this research. The term has been loosely used earlier by researchers and practitioners to describe any of the intelligences applied towards artistic ends. But in this study, it was possible to identify some of the conceptual properties of Artistic intelligence. As per the data, it is manifest primarily in Musical, Kinesthetic and Spatial intelligence. Of the three, Musical intelligence appears core to the concept and important to artists
irrespective of the art practiced. If the art does not directly involve working with music or sound, then the intelligence may be developed to a high order, but music still remains important to the artist. Kinesthetic intelligence similarly, was not only relevant to dancers, but also to instrumental musicians, painters, sculptors, crafts people, theatre people and film-makers, among others. It seems to be closely related to Musical intelligence, more so than any of the other intelligences, and so forms part of the construct of the Artistic Mind. Spatial intelligence was a specialized kind of intelligence, deeply important to those whose work involved the visual medium – painters, sculptors, photographers, film-makers and theatre people, but not otherwise. Linguistic intelligence is surely used by those who work with text such as poets, authors, theatre people and film writers, but even for them it was not their strongest area or most preferred intelligence and so I did not include Linguistic intelligence within the construct of the Artistic Mind. To extend the analysis, I found that artists tended to have gifts in more than one of the three areas. Uday Shankar most famous for his grace and presence on stage designed most of his own sets and costumes as well as directing the music for his productions. Raj Kapoor, an accomplished actor and director was also gifted in the spatial and musical domains being able to visualize scenes operatically. Kelucharan Mohapatra the doyen of Odissi dance was also an accomplished musician and patachitrakar (painter). Divya who is a dancer can also sing to performance level, Pavan who is a theatre director and cinematographer can play several musical instruments, Anjan the photojournalist used to play the drums, Soumya is a theatre director, but entered the domain through stage design, Anagha is a poetess who is also trained in music and dance, and so on. Perhaps it is a coincidence or perhaps it can be explained by the concept of Artistic intelligence driving performance in musical, spatial and kinesthetic areas towards artistic ends. At this point we can only hypothesize that the construct of Artistic intelligence exists. I lot more work will be needed to identify further aspects of the concept and verify its manifestations.

The data also brought to light several personality traits of artists – Independence, Dealing with Uncertainty, Flexibility/Flow and Tenacity/Challenge – which combined to form an Artistic Identity that was fluid, continuous, self-defined and dominated the lives of all the artists. These traits were found to be similar to the personality characteristics of creative people identified by previous research (Guilford [1958], Barron [1966], Torrance [1970], Pathak [1989], Rethi Devi [1993], Gardner[1993], Csikszentmihalyi [1996], Sternberg [2006]) and I inferred that though the Artistic Mind may be distinct, the Artistic Personality appears to be a subset of the Creative Personality. Analysis of narratives and biographies also helped understand the process of choice involved in becoming an artist. As per the data, the choice to lead an artistic life coincides with an at least partial resolution of identity. The moment of choice is usually preceded by some powerful crystallizing experience (this was not true for the three non-artists interviewed) and is a charged one more so for artists than others in mainstream careers. This choice was important to generating commitment to a domain. Even if training in a domain began in childhood, the decision to be an artist only took place at this choice point which was somewhere between eight to eighteen years of age, usually during the high school
years. For few artists, questions of identity surfaced later in life either because they had postponed the search for identity or because they went through experiences that made them want to reevaluate themselves. But even so, the identification of their domains had taken place earlier.

Entry into the chosen domain happened earlier for those from Artistic Heritage backgrounds, usually before ten years of age. Where this seemed to be of advantage was in highly structured domains like music or dance where age at entry seemed to influence the extent of artistic achievement. Those from an Artistic Heritage were also at an advantage when it came to entry into the Field which they could easily achieve under the protection of senior artists in the family, through the professional connections or the community network that they belonged to. Those coming from Non-Artistic or Arts Sensitive backgrounds had to rely primarily on their community networks to promote their art. There were a few artists from non-Heritage backgrounds who entered the field through their own professional contacts, but in these cases, the struggle to gain entry was quite intense – financially, socially and artistically – especially because they were also just learning the rules of the domain at that time. In cases where the artist chose a domain/field that was different from his/her parents, the struggle was similar to those coming from a non-Heritage background. Artistic Heritage was important therefore not so much for the talent that the parents passed on to their artistic wards, but the opportunities to master the rules of the domain and enter the field without much struggle.

9.6. Conclusions and future directions

I believe that this piece of research has just about scratched the surface when it comes to understanding artists, their artistic abilities and their choices. There is plenty more that needs to be done to verify the concept of artistic intelligence, to understand in what ways artists are different from others and how artistic intelligence can contribute to the lives of artists and the lives of non-artists. Just like with intelligence or any other construct, it is by establishing the correlates of artistic intelligence, correlates that are valued in our society that the concept will come into its own. If it is possible in future to link artistic intelligence to success or well-being or other positive indicators, then this study would have served its role as a link in the chain. It has shed light on the way artists make their choice to be an artist, the intelligences which are prominent in the artistic mind and the way immediate family and social environment influences the development of the artist. The three stage model can assist those who wish to help the aspiring artist – teachers, parents, counselors, etc. It is common knowledge that art is a difficult path with very little chance of material reward. But this model highlights the specific issues that the artist is likely to face at each stage in his/her personal journey. Isolating the cluster of personality traits (as against individual traits) that separate the artists and non-artists could be another project perhaps a meta-analysis based on existing research reports. Applying the findings of this research, it is easier to bridge the gap between the arts and other fields of human endeavor like management (e.g. does cultivating artistic intelligence lead to better decision-
making?) or education (opening up the arts as a possibility for living), it is easier to develop concrete strategies for arts management or even develop arts education curricula using MI theory.

The research also served to highlight certain aspects of intelligence. The dominant view of general intelligence has held that it is mostly inherited and changes little in one’s lifetime. But we have indications of environmental factors impacting the development of intelligence as defined by MI theory. Gardner viewed intelligence as a potential, but there is data which suggests that the potential could be substantially augmented through training, practice and exposure. Is this true of all eight intelligences? The nature of each intelligence itself needs further study whether within or apart from its manifestations in art. The MI questionnaire can perhaps be developed for use along with other measures of ability to create comprehensive measures of the multiple intelligences, not with a view to discriminating between individuals by labeling them as intelligent or not, but by helping them find areas of life and work that can be exceptionally fulfilling through exercising their strengths. Therefore, though the sample was small and the scope of this research limited, there are several promising lines of inquiry coming out of it and if some of these are pursued, perhaps sometime soon we will have just as rich a body of research on artists as we have on creative folks, on gifted individuals and on intelligent people.